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Viewing cable 08SANSALVADOR321, WHA/CEN DIRECTOR FEELEY VISIT TO EL SALVADOR

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#08SANSALVADOR321.

Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
08SANSALVADOR321	2008-03-14 19:58	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy San Salvador

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PP RUEHWEB

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SAN SALVADOR 000321

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR WHA/CEN JOHN FEELEY AND HILLARY THOMPSON
DEPT FOR WHA/MEX

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/16/2017
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [ES](#) [KDEM](#) [MX](#)
SUBJECT: WHA/CEN DIRECTOR FEELEY VISIT TO EL SALVADOR

Classified By: Ambassador Charles L. Glazer, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: From March 4-7, WHA/CEN Director John Feeley visited El Salvador as part of a regional visit focused on the Merida Initiative. During the visit, Feeley attended the Ambassador's speech to the American Chamber of Commerce in El Salvador, discussed the Merida Initiative with Deputy Foreign Minister Calix, and discussed Salvadoran electoral politics with prominent figures across the political spectrum. End Summary.

¶2. (U) WHA/CEN Director John Feeley visited El Salvador March 4-7 as part of a regional visit to discuss progress on the Merida initiative in Washington. Feeley kicked off his visit by attending Ambassador Glazer's speech to the American Chamber of Commerce of El Salvador which focused on the need for the Salvadoran private sector to become more involved in working towards a solution to El Salvador's public security problems.

¶3. (C) Feeley and PolCouns met with Deputy Foreign Minister Eduardo Calix on March 5. Calix was accompanied by Nelson Amaya, Deputy Director General for Foreign Policy. Calix, in his capacity as President Pro Tempore of SICA, welcomed Feeley's visit in order to clarify confusion that had emerged among several Central American countries about Plan Merida. Calix said the Central American countries had the impression that the regional security plan they had been developing in response to President Bush's request in March 2007 was somehow a different exercise than Plan Merida, which appeared to have a Central American component grafted on to a Mexico-centric proposal. Feeley explained that in practice, the regional security plan and Plan Merida were - and had to be - the same thing, since there was no other mechanism on the horizon to respond to the Central American needs. Ironically, he said, Mexico feels like their initiative has been hijacked by the Central American countries, and vice versa.

¶4. (C) Later on March 5, Feeley and Poloff met with Roberto Rubio-Fabian, director of the Fundacion Nacional para el Desarrollo (FUNDE), a left-of-center research and development think-tank. Rubio, an FMLN spokesman during the 1980's describes his current relationship with the FMLN as one "from a distance." He said that he was worried about ARENA since there were really no good candidates left in the running. What remained was to choose "the best of a bad group." Rubio claimed that Rodrigo Avila, the former Director of the National Civilian Police and presumptive front-runner for the ARENA nomination, was not a good candidate and would be an even worse President. An Avila candidacy "would be fatal" to ARENA. The Salvadoran electorate is looking for change, Rubio added, and if an ARENA candidate merely offers "more of the same," he cannot win.

¶5. (C) Rubio said Luis Mario Rodriguez would be a better candidate and referred to him as the "Obama" of the ARENA candidates saying that he offered the most tangible opportunity for change within the party. Unlike the other candidates, Rodriguez would not be divisive. He added that Rodriguez was gaining the support of the large business interests which wield very significant power in Salvadoran politics. That said, he added that Saca was, in his opinion, the most powerful Salvadoran president in recent times, and that Avila was Saca's candidate.

¶6. (C) The FMLN, according to Rubio, has begun the long process of change, for the better, in both its discourse and its beliefs. He said that what remained to be seen about the Funes candidacy was whether Funes would shape the Frente or if the Frente would shape Funes. How Funes would ultimately manage to connect with the FMLN is still very uncertain as is what the process will cost Funes in terms of his autonomy. Though Funes is a strong candidate, he still has significant hurdles to overcome including funding for his candidacy (the Venezuela factor) and how to gain the support of the upper class. Rubio concluded the meeting by saying that ARENA could still win if it managed to "get itself together" and avoid the temptation to resort to electoral fraud. He added that corruption in President Saca's inner circle could also

damage the party.

¶7. (C) Feeley and EconCouns met March 5 with Alexander Segovia the economic advisor to FMLN presidential candidate Mauricio Funes. Segovia is an Oxford-educated economist who has worked for USAID, IDB, UNDP and several other IOs and NGOs. Segovia is a member of an organization called "Friends of Mauricio" which aspires to be a "third way" in Salvadoran politics. The group includes former ARENA party members, students, entrepreneurs, people who had never voted before and anyone interested in supporting Funes. The group intends to build, what Segovia describes as significant support from Salvadorans at home and abroad into a social movement to act as a counterweight to both ARENA and, if needed, the old guard of the FMLN.

¶8. (C) The death of Schafik Handal in 2006 was a turning point for the FMLN, according to Segovia. He said that it brought the party closer together and that there is now a good, collegial relationship within the party. The FMLN has given Funes plenty of autonomy. Neither Segovia nor Funes is a member of the FMLN, but to satisfy Salvadoran Constitutional election requirements, the latter will have to join before the election. When asked which of the ARENA pre-candidates the FMLN feared most, Segovia replied "none of them." He thought that Avila had received the "dedazo" from Saca, but would not completely rule out Mario Luis Rodriguez because "he too is one of Saca's guys." He thought that Vice President de Escobar had no chance whatsoever to gain the nod from ARENA on March 15. Segovia said that according to their polls Avila had the better name recognition, but none of the ARENA pre-candidates polled particularly well. The one candidate that he would have feared was Roberto Murray Meza, because in Segovia's opinion Murray Meza was the one person who could have united all of the capital power of ARENA. Segovia said he realizes that ARENA will fight a very hard campaign, no matter who becomes their candidate.

¶9. (C) Segovia said that in the recent past Gerson Martinez authored the FMLN's economic policy. He described Martinez as a moderate and that the two of them got along well. This time, it is Segovia who is the chief drafter of the economic policy, but he will be working closely with Martinez. They expect to have the economic plan completed by the end of April. Dollarization, he said, is here to stay. One of their other basic principles will be to keep CAFTA and strong relations with the USG, because of the strong trade, bilateral and familial relations between the two countries. He expects to expand FTAs to other countries as well and noted that the private sector plays a crucial role in the economy.

¶10. (C) Segovia said they have met and will continue to meet with the private sector (he mentioned Roberto Kriete by name) and assured that there would be nonnationalization and no expropriations under a Funes government. Segovia said what they wanted was for everyone to be treated equally and to address the income disparity in the country. He believes that the government has been used by a privileged few to protect their interests and keep the majority of wealth concentrated in a handful of powerful interests. One of the things they will seek to accomplish early on in a Funes presidency is fiscal reform. Segovia said he was aware of (and may have worked on) some of the fiscal reform programs that USAID had supported in Guatemala, and he would look to do something similar in El Salvador.

¶11. (C) Finally, Feeley and PolCouns met with Salvador Samayoa, peace accords negotiator and member of the National Development Commission. Samayoa reported on ongoing efforts between FDR, CD and PDC to form a coalition to back a single presidential candidate (Arturo Zablah) and a combined list for the national Assembly. Samayoa said that in the ongoing ARENA contest, Rodrigo Avila had President Saca's support, but that Luis Mario Rodriguez could eventually come out on top if disgruntled business interests in ARENA managed to derail Avila's candidacy, something Samayoa saw as unlikely.

GLAZER